

Domata Peko is the roll-up-your-sleeves defender Broncos needed

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

August 24, 2017

There probably isn't room under the radar for Denver Broncos nose tackle Domata Peko, but the 325-(or so)-pounder was an acquisition made this offseason to relatively limited fanfare.

But if things go as Peko and the Broncos would like, this picture of durability, stability, consistency and production will be a big reason why Denver's defense plays a lot more like 2015 than it did in 2016. Not that everybody will notice, because as former Broncos nose tackle Rubin Carter has said, "Nobody in their right mind would say they want to grow up to be a nose tackle."

The Broncos defense was at its disruptive best at times in 2016 as it finished No. 1 in the league in pass defense for the second consecutive season. The Broncos were third in sacks, fourth in scoring defense and fourth in total defense.

However, they were 28th in run defense, and down the stretch, when the Broncos needed at least one more victory to get into the playoff field, they couldn't stop offenses from pounding away at them. And they couldn't keep those offenses in the down-and-distance situations where they could turn their pass-rushers loose, as they had in '15, when they led the league in every significant statistical category on the way to a Super Bowl win.

Von Miller was held without a sack in the final four games, and the Broncos went into the offseason looking to bulk up, hence Peko's job description.

"His job is to take up two gaps," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said.

"Everybody has something dirty about their job, and for the D-line, they have to take on those double-teams and keep the linebackers clean," Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods said of Peko and his linemates. "He's been doing it for a long time and doing it well."

Indeed, Peko is about to begin his 12th NFL season. The fact he has been around that long at one of the most physically grueling spots on the field -- the epicenter of collisions on every play -- and played every game in 10 of those previous 11 seasons is a whole lot of good fortune mixed with preparation and desire.

"That's crazy, man," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "I'm in my sixth year and he's in there with all that traffic going into his 12th year. But he's just the kind of guy we need in there."

"I'm blessed to play 12 years," Peko said. "I say God has been keeping me strong and healthy. So a big shoutout to him, the man upstairs. I just keep my routine going. I hit the hot tubs and the cold tubs every day to keep my body right."

The math is simple, really: The more blockers Peko and the team's defensive ends can occupy, the fewer get to the Broncos linebackers. Then Miller, Todd Davis and Brandon Marshall have a far cleaner path to the ball carrier, and punts follow.

Too often last season, the Broncos front was pushed off the ball and the linebackers were wrestling with guards and centers who had moved a defensive lineman out of the way to get to the second level.

"Just being behind him, you can see the difference," Marshall said. "It's going to be a lot harder to do what teams did to us last year."

"He's just a beast," Miller said. "He rushes the passer and he's solid in the run, and that's something we were missing the last year, maybe even two years. To have him there, have him shore up the defensive line, is great."

But Peko isn't just a snap-to-whistle addition, he's a presence. In practices, you can often see the 32-year-old helping one of the team's younger linemen in the art of winning the battles in the tight quarters around the line of scrimmage. Peko also doesn't ever really seem rattled by the heat, the length of practice or the fact that whenever the ball is snapped, he's often got two 300-pound offensive linemen trying to move him.

"People ask me sometimes how to keep at it; I say you don't get out of shape," Peko said. "Always stay at your best."

"It's a big addition for us," Woods said. "He's a veteran player and he's played for a long time. He not only brings leadership to us on the football field but in the classroom as well. He's very, very smart, and guys look up to him. He's done a great job so far."

Domata Peko bringing big frame — and hair — to heart of Broncos reconstructed defensive line

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Post
July 29, 2017

Everything about Domata Peko is big.

The new 325-pound nose tackle for the Broncos has been hard to miss at training camp. If you can't spot the hair that juts out of the bottom of his helmet and flows downward until it covers up the No. 94 on the back of his jersey, the giant ear-to-ear grin that seems permanently attached to his face gives him away.

If none of that works, you can identify him by the giant circular hole cut into the T-shirt underneath his shoulder pads, exposing the midsection meant for moving massive men.

"I'm just trying to breathe, get some ventilation going for the big guys," Peko said of his on-field fashion choice.

The Broncos in March signed Peko, who spent the first 11 seasons of his career in Cincinnati, to a two-year, \$7.5 million contract, an investment in the kind of size they needed to add up front after finishing 28th in the NFL against the run last season.

For Peko, the move was a chance to start fresh.

"It's exciting to come in and be a part of this great group of guys who have been competing for years," Peko said. "The back end is always on point. We've got some monsters up front. The linebackers are flying downhill. It's been amazing."

Peko's primary job at the center of the Broncos' 3-4 defense is to gobble up space and occupy blockers, leaving them more vulnerable to Denver's army of pass rushers. It's a role, Broncos coach Vance Joseph said, to which the durable Peko has been well-suited.

"He's what you want in a nose guard," Joseph said. "He's a big man who can hold a point. He's got some quickness to rush the passer on pass downs, but his job is to take up two gaps and he can do that."

The Broncos won't put on their full pads until Sunday morning, but Peko's presence along the defensive front already has been felt.

"When they brought him in, I was happy because I know that he's a great guy, a great player and a great leader," offensive guard Ron Leary said. "We've had some great battles and they're only going to get better, but it's going to help both of us — the O-line and the D-line — get better and get ready for Sundays."

The Broncos also added Zach Kerr, a 334-pound former Colts defensive end, during free agency as part of general manager John Elway's plan to increase the size and toughness on both lines. Kerr figures to provide depth behind Derek Wolfe, Jared Crick and Adam Gotsis.

DeMarcus Walker, the 280-pound second-round pick in April's draft out of Florida State, also is expected to make an immediate impact at defensive end. That's more than 900 pounds of new bodies on the defensive line who are eager to provide more nastiness than the unit possessed last season.

"It's only day three of camp so we've got a long way to go and we've got to keep pushing each other," Peko said. "It's an exciting time to be a Bronco."

Domata Peko has an extremely simple job description with the Denver Broncos

By Zac Stevens
BSN Denver
May 19, 2017

Last season, for the first time since 2010, the Broncos missed the playoffs. While there was plenty of blame to go around on all three units, Denver's defense, yes the defense, had a gaping hole that hindered their ability to reach the postseason—stopping the run.

In the offseason, John Elway addressed that hole in a large way, literally. On a single day in free agency, March 11, the Broncos added a combined 659 pounds on the defensive line with the signings of Domata Peko and Zach Kerr. Now, with over half of the offseason workout program under his belt with the new team, Peko already knows exactly what his role will be on the defense.

"I'm coming in here trying to be a run stopper like I've been doing, and do that to the best of my ability," he said. "Their run-average [last season] was way too high for being a great defense."

Led by the best pass defense in the league, Denver's defense finished tops in many statistical categories last season, however, stopping the run was close to the bottom. The Broncos defense gave up the fifth-most rushing yards per game (130.3), the 14th-worst yards per carry (4.3) and the 14th-most rushing touchdowns.

Fortunately, Peko's 11 years with the Cincinnati Bengals have all been focused around eating up offensive lineman to stuff the run.

"Being in the AFC North, it's a really tough run-type of division," he said. "Being a nose guard for over a decade, that's what I do. I like to clog up the middle of the field. I like to fill in those run lanes that were kind of lacking last year."

Last season, while the run defense wasn't the fault of one player, the man in the middle of the defensive line was Sylvester Williams. Williams, who signed with the Tennessee Titans this offseason, was never a true nose tackle meant to take on multiple blockers in an effort to stop the run. However, that's what Peko's been doing his entire career and what he'll continue to do in Denver.

"I'm playing nose guard. It's the same thing I've been playing in Cincinnati. I'm playing nose guard right now and that's what I've been doing for years and that's what I play," he said. "It's a little bit different now. It's a 3-4 compared to a 4-3, but it's all to say that I'm lined up right over the center and that's what I've been doing. That's where I make my money. Right there in the middle of the field."

The biggest concern with the big man is his "older" age. Peko will turn 33 in November and already has 11 seasons of physical NFL caliber football under his belt. But in the two short months he's been with the Broncos, he's taken full advantage of their staff to get him in peak condition.

"I'm in year 12 but I feel good. My body is feeling great," Peko said as he stood in a sopping wet sweatshirt coming off a workout. "I feel like I'm in the best shape that I've ever been in. I'm getting

stronger than I've ever been. The weight room staff over here is no joke. They're doing a great job with me—[Strength and Conditioning] Coach Luke [Richesson] and also with [Defensive Line] Coach Bill [Kollar], he's a heck of a coach...I really love it here."

With his body bigger and better than ever, his mentality toward the game every second he's awake hasn't faded, either.

"I still love waking up in the morning and coming out here to hit o-linemen and hitting running backs," he said grinning ear to ear. "That's fun to me. I love that stuff."

Denver courted Peko for his ability to stuff the run. Peko ultimately chose Denver for their ability to lead him to the promise land.

"In Cincy, we're always talking about, 'Oh, I want to win a playoff game. I want to win a playoff game.' But over here, we're talking about winning championships. That's what brought me here, I want to win a championship."

Peko's ability to stop the run in Denver could ultimately be the deciding factor to whether he earns the Super Bowl ring he's chasing in the Mile High City.

Domata Peko knows expectations are higher in Denver

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

May 16, 2017

Domata Peko hasn't played a game yet for the Broncos, but he's well aware of the standard in Denver.

It's no secret the Broncos have more Super Bowl appearances (7) than losing seasons (5) under Owner Pat Bowlen's direction. And that resume creates expectations that Peko knows are higher than in most other NFL cities.

That's even true in Cincinnati, where Peko played his first 11 seasons and helped the Bengals make six playoff appearances in an eight-season stretch. But the Bengals could never find that elusive playoff win.

"In Cincy, we were kind of always talking about, 'Oh, I want to win a playoff game. I want to win a playoff game,'" Peko said. "But over here, we're talking about winning championships. That's what brought me here. I want to win a championship."

The 32-year-old nose guard chose Denver in part because of his desire to win a title and in part because his cousin, defensive lineman Kyle Peko, is on the roster. Kyle's presence gave Domata stability even in light of a move away from a city where he had played his whole career.

But Peko has also found familiarity on the football field. Though he's transitioned from a 4-3 defense to a 3-4, he's still in a spot where he's very comfortable: right over the center. And that's where, as he said Tuesday afternoon, he makes his money.

"Being in the AFC North, it's a really tough run type of [division]," Peko said. "And being a nose guard [for] over a decade, that's what I do. I like to clog up the middle of the field. I like to fill up those run lanes that were kind of lacking last year."

Peko's teammates along the line are tough, just as they were in Cincinnati, but he senses a different kind of intensity in Denver. And they're expecting improvement.

The Broncos are months away from seeing the results, but even in walkthroughs, Peko said he has sensed the chemistry between Derek Wolfe, Jared Crick, Adam Gotsis and a number of other players in Defensive Line Coach Bill Kollar's room.

"Coach Bill, he's a heck of a coach," Peko said. "He really gets after you, and what I love about Coach Bill is that he has no favorites. If you're a young guy, if you're an old guy, he's going to tell you how it is. So I really love it here."

Peko may be closer to "old guy" on the scale, but Strength and Conditioning Coach Luke Richesson has him in "the best shape I've ever been in."

If that's the case, then Peko should be poised for success in the Broncos' plans to become more physical against the run.

Because if there's one thing Peko enjoys, it's hitting people.

"I still have that hunger that I want to get a ring," Peko said. "I want to win a championship, and that's what keeps me going. Also my family, playing for my children, my wife – those are motivations. I think that's what's keeping me young, keeping me live.

"You see guys, when they get a little older, they start losing their love for the game but for me, I still love waking up in the morning, coming out here, hitting O-linemen and hitting running backs. That's fun to me. I love this stuff."